

Graduation Project Proposal

Martin Osowski, November 2021

Piet Zwart Institute: Department of Lens-Based Media

What do you want to make?

A film retelling three stories exploring the tensions of how meanings, narratives and faiths emerge from material objects and symbols. In the film I want to weave between topics of my family and regional histories, speculative narratives of the future, the materiality of the human body, the mediation of experience through digital media, and conquests of nature/the unknown.

The three retellings in the film will center around the symbolic landscapes of rural Poland relevant to previous generations of my family. In the visual language of the film it is my intention to focus on a defined set of symbols that are continuously recombined and recontextualized as the three narratives progress. At the moment I am considering using symbols of apples, flags and national memorabilia, and taxidermized animals, however I am still exploring this and may add additional symbols. The three stories are connected to one another by the presence of these symbols throughout the film.

Descriptions of the sections of the film:

Introduction with a recreated scene from my grandfather's book *Małe Wielkie Historie*

My grandfather wrote a book documenting the local history and his experiences in his region of rural Poland. I want to recreate a scene from this book in order to establish the tone and cultural setting of the film.

Retelling of Stanislaw Lem's *His Master's Voice (Głos Pana)*

His Master's Voice is a Polish science fiction novel telling the story of a group of scientists who detect a neutrino signal from outer space, believed to be a message from an alien intelligence. They attempt to decipher this message in order to find out who sent it and why. However, despite their lengthy attempts at probing the signal they find themselves unable to make any substantial progress and are in the end left asking whether the signal was indeed a message or perhaps simply an unknown natural phenomenon.

Interlude exploring the materialities of the human body

In this section I want to explore the tensions of how grand narratives are formed on the basis of an alien and grotesque materiality that constitutes the human body. I want to employ visuals that show the insides of the body, such as publicly available footage of life-saving surgical procedures. I find this type of footage quite jarring and surreal, although it is merely showing

that which is a few millimeters behind the skin. I want to make the viewer reflect on how the narratives being explored in the film are all constructed by this materiality.

Retelling of the Fall of Man

I want to retell this narrative that is central to Polish Catholicism and is very present in the regional psyche. In doing so I want to place this narrative in adjacency to His Master's Voice and explore how this pervasive story bears parallel tensions to those experienced by the scientists trying to decode a suspected alien message.

Interlude exploring narratives formed through digital media

In this interlude I want to meditate on how we now inhabit symbolic landscapes that are largely mediated by digital technologies. I want the viewer to draw a comparison between the narratives and motifs explored in the film and the contemporary construction of narratives through digital media.

Retelling of a story of heroic conquest of the unknown leading to desolation (I still need to specify the story)

In the final narrative of the film, I want to consider a character who undertakes a conquest of some unknown place in order to fulfill an internalized narrative of heroism and glory. This desire leads to a breakdown of the character's rationality as they tear through the landscape in search of their aim. In the end they are unable to find that which they are looking for. I still need to find an appropriate story to tell however I am influenced here by for instance Herzog's *Aguirre*.

Conclusion meditating on the central theme of the film (tensions of how meanings, narratives and faiths emerge from material objects and symbols)

To conclude the film I want to return to the setting of my grandparent's house in Poland and speak visually to its materialities and localities. This place reflects the material and symbolic landscape from which each of these stories has been extrapolated.

How do you plan to make it?

The realization of this project will require me to undertake a number of tasks.

Firstly, I will write a screenplay for the narratives retold in the film. Next to this I will also be developing mood boards and sketching out scene compositions in order to explore how I want to combine the narratives with my visual material. In developing the screenplay and mood boards I will be exploring reference materials including *His Masters Voice* and *Małe Wielkie Historie*.

I am planning to record a large portion of the footage for the film during visits to Poland. Next to this I may use some found footage, particularly in the interludes of the film. I will also be writing a score for the film in parallel to these tasks. I want to incorporate actors in the retelling of the story and so I will need to also determine the logistics of this. I have limited experience in working with people in front of my camera and so I am seeing this as an area where I may need assistance from tutors or others who are more experienced in this domain.

Finally I will need to edit the film into its final product.

What is your timetable?

- November-December 2021: Conduct research, develop mood boards for various acts in the film, create sketches to establish visual language, begin writing screenplay, plan shooting.
- December 2021: Travel to Poland to film footage.
- January 2022: Begin editing the captured footage and layer with narration/score. Film scenes with actors in the Netherlands.
- February 2022: Evaluate project up until this point and establish plan for additional shooting and/or writing.

In parallel to this timetable, I will be working on writing the score for the film.

I acknowledge that completing the entire project before the end of the academic year is likely to be too ambitious of a task. Therefore, it may be the case that I will complete a portion of the film for the graduation project and continue working on it post-graduation. At some point I will need to make a decision as to which portion of the film I want to focus on before graduation.

Why do you want to make it?

With this project I want to synthesize the range of interests and concerns that I have been engaging with over the past few years. On a personal level, I have for some time been interested in absurdist ideas of how meanings and constructed worlds wholly define the human experience, and on the other hand how these meanings and worlds by their nature cannot rest on any objective foundation. I am interested in exploring this tension as it relates to the symbolic landscapes that surround me, however I am also interested in the openings it provides for new meanings to be constructed.

My relation to my family history in Poland is also a topic that deeply interests me. I am a second-generation immigrant from Poland to Canada and therefore grew up with a relationship to Polish culture that was simultaneously very present but also distant. This has led me to become quite curious about my relationship to the past of my family, the world they inhabited, as well as my relationship to this world.

Finally, I am also motivated to have my work speak to contemporary circumstances and concerns. This motivation has led me to undertake a significant amount of research in my first year at the Piet Zwart into image culture and media theory. This too harkens back to an interest in how material landscapes of signification shape and mediate our experiences as people. I feel a desire to reconcile this contemporary

research with intergenerational experiences and broader questions concerning the construction of worlds we inhabit.

Relation to previous practice

Previously I have undertaken photographic projects exploring my relationship to the symbolic landscapes of rural Poland and well as to the East European region. In the summer of 2019 I cycled approximately 2000km from Poland to Serbia as a way to 'discover' this part of the world that forms my family history and documented the experience on 35mm film. In these projects I was particularly interested in how these symbolic landscapes could form totalizing panoramas that wholly encapsulated the experiences and meanings previous generations of my family inhabited, and yet at the same time how my relationship to them felt fragile and ungrounded.

During the first year at the Piet Zwart I undertook a significant research into media theory, image culture, and the means by which digital systems mediate human experience. This resulted in projects where I experimented with the materiality of digital interfaces in order to form a different set of associations between a human subject and digital materials. In these experiments I was largely interested in the relationships between the human body, digital machines, and the subjectivities that emerged from this.

I also have been involved with music for approximately the past 10 years with a significant portion of this time being focused on composition for classical guitar. At the moment I am experimenting with music composition in computer based settings. I find music to be one of my largest artistic interests, and therefore want to integrate this dimension of my practice into the graduation project.

Relation to a larger context

My vision for this project speaks to what I see as being quite universal themes, however I believe it has connections to several contemporary discourses. This is elaborated further in my thesis outline. Below are several works that I find to be relevant or adjacent.

Marjolijn Dijkman – *Surviving New Land* (2010)



A film consisting of footage of new land being dredged by the Dutch state to expand the port of Rotterdam, layered with audio from films about western “explorers” finding “undiscovered” land. The film draws parallels between the Dutch colonial project and contemporary forms of expansion related to capitalist exploitation. I find there to be a strong parallel between the themes of this film and the final story retold in my project, following a character that has internalized a constructed narrative of conquest and exploration.

https://www.marjolijndijkman.com/?rd_project=113&lang=en

Sergei Parajanov – *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969)



I am taking stylistic precedent from *The Color of Pomegranates*. The film uses heavily symbolic tableaux to tell the story of its protagonist, often embedding these symbols into surreal compositions to heighten their power. I am similarly interested in using a set of symbols throughout my film and recombining them in surreal ways in order to put the materialities of the regional landscape in dialogue with the narratives being retold.

Marian Paduszyński – *Małe Wielkie Historie* (2017)

My grandfather wrote a book retelling the local history of his region in rural Poland. I am drawing on this book to provide a local relevance to the narratives being explored in my film. As such I want the film to not be arbitrary with regards to its setting, but rather grounded in a specific place and set of experiences.

References/bibliography

- *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*, Eric R. Wolf
- *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche
- *The Medium is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan
- *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler
- *Małe Wielkie Historie*, Marian Paduszyński
- *His Master's Voice*, Stanisław Lem
- *Mirror*, Andrei Tarkovskiy
- *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Bruno Latour
- *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Dorothy Holland
- *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett
- *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus

Previous work I am drawing from visually







